

BURUNDI

Teenage mothers, victims of sexual gender-based violence, return to school

Seventeen-year-old Chantal smiles shyly, cuddling her daughter Espérance (not their real names) two and a half years old, and says, “I like it here, I am fed, I receive medical attention, I am learning a trade; best of all, I am back in secondary school.” Two years earlier, she had been raped by a soldier, was pregnant, on the streets and contemplating suicide. Now she will graduate in two years’ time and have a trade to support her growing child.

Chantal is one of 29 teenage mothers and 31 children being rehabilitated by UNICEF’s partner Fondation Stamm, a national non-governmental organization founded by Madam Verena Ndorimana, née Stamm. It was established in August 1999 to provide humanitarian aid to war orphans, widows and street children. In 2005 the Foundation opened a centre in Bujumbura, aptly named in the national language *Nyubahiriza* (make me respected), to rehabilitate street girls, especially underage single mothers. The girls are given education, taught trades, with their children cared for and sent to nursery schools.

Those without primary education are taught to read and write and those who did not complete secondary school are returned to school after childbirth. All are taught sewing, embroidery, basket weaving and jewellery making. Between 2003 and 2007, UNICEF has supported the Foundation’s activities with no less than US\$ 105,000 in funds, in addition to providing insecticide-treated mosquito nets, sheeting, school kits and medical supplies.

Chantal and her colleagues are lucky, thousands of underage girls are still on the streets, getting pregnant through rape or prostitution and having babies without fathers, a legacy of the war years and cultural gender bias.

Burundi’s years of sorrow: One by-product of Burundi’s years of conflict and sorrow (1993-2005) is the high prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against young girls. They are the invisible victims of Burundi’s 12-year-long conflict. While the world hears a lot about male child soldiers, not much is said of thousands of young girls abducted and raped by rebel groups, policemen and government soldiers.

Many children are also violated by family members, their teachers or neighbours. Only some 5 per cent of these cases are reported to law enforcement agencies and the few are treated with levity; the aggressors hardly ever get punished.

In remote communities, if the aggressor is a non-family member, community

elders are likely to ask him to pay a small fine or marry the victim. Worse, due to stigmatization, victims rarely seek or get support for their physical and psychological traumas. Many girls get pregnant and are infected with sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

In 2006, only 730 cases were reported in SGBV centres supported by UNICEF. Nearly half of these cases – 46.84 per cent – were girls under 18 years. And the figures are rising. Of the 397 cases notified to UNICEF between January and June 2007, 215 victims were children. The Seruka Centre in Bujumbura, run by Médecins Sans Frontières Belgique, reported an average of 120 rape incidents per month, two thirds of which involved children, 30 per cent below 12 years and 15 per cent below 5 years.

Support for the survivors: In the five high prevalent provinces – Muyinga, Ruyigi, Bujumbura Rural, Makamba and Cankuzo – UNICEF supports centres for SGBV case management and HIV prevention. There the survivors receive medical care, psychosocial counselling, legal support and rehabilitation in a safe and secure environment or, where possible, reintegration into their community.

Campaign to prevent gender-based violence: In the same provinces, UNICEF supports provincial committees set up to prevent SGBV by training more than 1,000 community mobilizers with the aim to bring about attitudinal and behavioural change at community level. The agency also helps train police and judicial officers to fight against the impunity offenders currently enjoy. An annual nationwide campaign to stop violence against women is jointly organized by Government, the United Nations and civil society. But more needs to be done.

As UNICEF Representative in Burundi, Bintou Keita, declared, “The country needs help to reform its judicial system and to stop the kind of impunity that is not really conducive to a good and protective environment for children.”